

## SCIENTIFIC MINDFULNESS: A FOUNDATION FOR FUTURE THEMES IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

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## ABSTRACT

We conceptualize new ways to qualify what themes should dominate the future IB research agenda by examining three questions: Whom should we ask? What should we ask and which selection criteria should we apply? What are the contextual forces? We propose scientific mindfulness as the way forward for generating themes in IB research.

## INTRODUCTION

What the future holds for international business and, as a consequence, which themes will dominate the field, has received much recent attention, as evidenced by publications in journals such as the *Journal of International Business Studies* (2008, Vol. 39) and *Management International Review* (Vol. 49, 2009/2). This effort is worthwhile because scholarly research guides and is guided by future practices of the international business community. In this article, we revisit the traditional notions of how science progresses within the field of International Business (IB). We raise the following questions: (i) Who should be involved in determining future trends and themes in IB? (ii) How should we judge which future research questions are worth exploring? (iii) What are the important contextual forces driving the future research agenda? By illuminating these questions, we hope to provide guidance, inspiration and encouragement to future IB scholars, whatever their background.

Based on our investigation and experience with fieldwork, we dare to illustrate alternative ways of *thinking* and *caring* that we believe are needed to shed light on the future of the IB scholarly field and to benefit practice and society. These findings are consistent with the call for change from Pfeffer (2009) who suggests that management research has become (a) disconnected from practice; (b) unconcerned with larger issues of social and human welfare; (c) institutionalized and thus takes things for granted and as uncontestable.

We ask ourselves some fundamental questions about the best way to identify and judge options for the future IB research agenda. As an international group of researchers called ION, we decided to step back and contemplate these questions as a group during our annual meeting in Istanbul in May 2009 and in subsequent workgroups. This article is the result of those discussions and further reflections. A subset of the research group membership has written the article; therefore, it may not reflect the individual views of each member. It does represent, however, the vigorous discussions that took place among the membership, and it is a perspective that we feel is worth sharing more broadly.

## ARE WE ASKING THE RIGHT PEOPLE? DEFINING THE EXPERTS

We believe that the term *experts in the field* (used by Griffith et al., 2008, and many others) begs the question: What experts from what fields? If we understand field to mean International Business, then we are missing a more diverse representation of scholars – including those in adjacent sciences and those with non-Western views – and practitioners worldwide. While science and practice may ask different questions, science should be a process that is based on evidence from the world rather than merely a scientist's opinions of the world (Van de Ven, 2007). As scientists, we cannot assume that the multinational organization (or its members or

stakeholders) is an outside actor, standing apart from the social and environmental contexts within which it operates.

Ferguson (1994: 82) raised the important question of “who counts as knowers?” and made a call for including more voices in research. More voices can refer to a wider range or different “classes” of people, from practitioners of trades to subcultures in less affluent regions of the world – voices that need representation by those who investigate and are able to write eloquently enough to make scholarly careers out of it. An important voice is that of workers who are not heard presumably because they do not hold positions of power. Yet, their ideas may be critical to the evolution of international business evolves and it is therefore important to include them in the practitioner group.

Today, in the academic world, “experts in the field” are those who have published the most or have gathered the most citations for their work. This world is characterized by a focus on history (and underlying assumptions) based on a system that comes with a strong tradition arising from the exploitation of existing knowledge constructs and theories (March, 1991). Citations are used to calculate the impact (factor) of research, but does this mean that scholars who have published the most have the greatest impact on business or society? If impact is solely gauged by being cited and published in the top-rated journal sphere, we run the risk of getting “trapped in the social echo chamber of our own voice” (Pettigrew, 2001: S69).

## **ARE WE ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS?**

If we are not asking the right questions, how do we determine what is right? Adler and Harzing (2009) reminded us that the original purpose of universities was to conduct research that contributes to advancing societal understanding and well-being, as opposed to primarily benefiting the careers of individuals or creating knowledge for its own sake and that of its creators. Most recently, Bell (2010) spoke to the issue of using our scholarship to create meaningful impact.

In seeking answers to the most appropriate questions, we focus on Van de Ven’s (2007) problem formulation step in the engaged scholarship process: What are the problems we are trying to solve? Are they relevant?

Engagement is not done just for socially acceptable, persuasive or enjoyable reasons; instead, it is undertaken out of necessity to learn and understand the problem domain. It’s the research question about the problem domain that drives the engaged scholarship process” (Van de Ven, 2007: 268).

How do we find these questions? If our epistemological aim is to create knowledge in the arena of international business, then a central question is what constitutes knowledge in international business versus knowledge in general. We believe there are knowledge domains that are particularly relevant to IB. We have chosen to work in an arena in which firms have dispersed locations, where businesses operate under different societal rules, institutions and governments, where individuals are socialized in demonstrably different ways and, thus, misunderstanding occurs more easily. It is not that these things are unimportant in other fields; instead, it is that they are particularly important in our field. Furthermore, Gordon Mitchell (2004: 213), in his discussion of social movement rhetoric, criticizes scholars for their lack of reflexivity, for not using their own theoretical tools “back on themselves to illuminate the status of their own scholarship.”

## WHAT CONTEXTUAL FORCES ARE DRIVING THE FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA?

We argue that current major global contextual changes that are affecting, and will continue to affect, IB are: *climate change*; *economic and social globalization*; *the technology gap*; and resultant *inequality, and sustainability*. These were chosen based on a) our close reading of the IB as well as other literatures dealing with future directions and challenges (for a recent example, see Aharoni and Brock, 2010); b) within them are subsumed many of the other issues that are creating complexity, such as terrorism, poverty and the global financial crisis; and c) because they have societal relevance. For example, the recent global financial meltdown can be seen as a result of increased economic globalization combined with an inattention to the sustainability of the free-market system as it has been practiced to date. Thus, these four key issues should play a major role in informing our view and discussion of international business and serve as fundamental drivers of future research. We acknowledge that there are overlaps between these categories but regard these overlaps as inevitable in such a discussion as this. We feel that neglect of these contextual changes by IB scholars, while filling incremental gaps in existing knowledge, corresponds to “fiddling while the world burns” (analogy borrowed from Worldwatch Institute, 2009). Studying phenomena derived from these forces will require what we call *scientific mindfulness*.

## THE ROAD AHEAD: SCIENTIFIC MINDFULNESS

Because of the complexity and magnitude of our questions, it will be necessary for researchers to engage in what we call *scientific mindfulness* to generate ideas and themes. In essence, scientific mindfulness is taking thoughtful approaches that are holistic, contextual and cross disciplinary. This approach is an extension of what has been termed “Mode 2” of research (see Anderson, et al., 2001: 393; Gibbons et al., 1994), in which the range of backgrounds and stakeholders involved in knowledge creation transcends the boundaries of traditional disciplines. Beyond simple mode of action, we see it as a *foundation* for many different kinds of research. *Scientific mindfulness* opens up the possibility of an interplay between traditional positivist ontologies that includes an openness to interpretive as well as radical humanist and structural approaches.

*Scientific mindfulness* features breadth and depth of idea generation. In this mode, ideas and themes are generated using multiple sources of information and involve multiple levels of analysis and inter-disciplinary inquiry. Deep contextual understanding of institutional, cultural, and societal conditions are critical contexts that must be taken into consideration in generating ideas and themes. Thus, a more holistic approach that is at once inter-disciplinary and mixed-method holds promise to generate ideas and themes that are both new and influential. It is not a process that we typically see in the discussion sections of empirical papers, where the narrow focus on the empirical research often produces only shallow ideas that are replications or incremental extensions of the existing work. We are often in a situation where scientists formulate problems that correspond closely to those techniques in which they are skilled and experienced (Kaplan, 1964, cited in Weick, 1996). Just as a photographer changes lenses to capture different motives (analogy from Peacock, 2001: 74), a scientifically mindful approach requires an exposure of the

research question to a larger set of research tools brought to the subject matter by a plethora of researchers and thus better suited to encompass the complexities of today's complex cultural organizations.

*Scientific mindfulness* also requires that we invite key informants, such as scholars from adjacent fields and practitioners, into our closed scientific circle, instead of barricading ourselves behind traditional disciplines such as psychology and economics (McGrath, 2007; Pfeffer, 2009; see also Jonsen et al., forthcoming). Forecasting changes in the business environment is critical for policy makers as well as corporate decision makers (Czinkota and Ronkainen, 2009) and a requirement if international business is to be sustainable as a legitimate scholarly field. Both rigor and relevance in IB research would benefit from wider interpretations of scholars in adjacent disciplines as well as those on the periphery of academia (i.e., outside of scholarly circles).

## CONCLUSION

Our objective in this article has been to conceptualize a new way of identifying the themes that *should* dominate the future IB research agenda. We began the discussion with some basic questions: Whom should we ask? What questions should we be asking and which selection criteria should we apply? What contextual forces will drive the research agenda? Exploration of these questions led us to challenge some of the common practices that currently take place in the field of IB research. As a result, we propose the concept of scientific mindfulness as the way forward. Scientific mindfulness is a holistic, cross-disciplinary, and contextual approach, wherein researchers need to make sense of multiple perspectives, from both academia and practice, with the betterment of society as the ultimate criterion.

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